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ABSTRACT

It is generally agreed among French linguists that the word has no phonetic or phonological status in French. This position reflects mostly pedagogical considerations and preoccupation with surface phonetic facts and demarcative signals. Investigation of processes of a more abstract nature reveals, however, that a certain number of rules summarizing phonotactic processes of Modern French must incorporate word boundaries as part of their environments.
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"On the Status of the Word in French Phonology"

B. Rochet

It is generally agreed among French linguists that the word in French has no phonetic or no phonological status.¹ Thus, according to Pierre Delattre "les divisions phonétiques de la chaîne parlée sont: les consonnes, les voyelles, les syllabes, les groupes rythmiques et les groupes phoniques."² In such an analysis, between the minimal segments and the breath - (or sense-) group, there is no room for the word. It would be unfair to attribute to Delattre this view that "le mot n'est pas une entité phonologique en français"³ without taking into account some of his articles in which he qualifies such a statement. Nevertheless such a position, bolstered by the pedagogical need to help foreign students master the flow of the French sentence, has become general among language teachers and more theoretically oriented linguists alike. Thus, along with Robert Politzer who contends that in French "the syllable boundaries have no relation to the word boundaries,"⁴ Ernst Pulgram postulates a "phonological rule on French syllabation, which says that the next-smallest unit of analysis after the breath-group is not the word, not the morpheme, but the syllable,"⁵ and feels justified in viewing as an inescapable step of the analysis of the French language "the elimination of the word from phonemic concerns" (p. 138).

Usually, the word is considered not to have any phonological status in French because of the absence of demarcative signals between words,

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and the phenomenon of liaison is given as the best example of this state of affairs. Thus, for Jurgen Klausenburger, the Modern French cursus must be considered as "one phonological word with (1) obliteration of all lexeme stresses except the last, which is found on the last syllable of the cursus, and (2) obliteration of all lexeme boundaries, which is exemplified by the well-known sandhi phenomena subsumed under liaison, enchaînement, and élision." French is thus opposed to English in that it does not exhibit any juncture signals of the type illustrated by the English examples nitrate vs night-rate, an aim vs a name, white shoes vs why choose etc.

The absence of obvious phonetic signals for word boundaries, which constituted the focus of and the basis for the views represented above, has occasionally been challenged or qualified. Marguerite Durand has shown that the [t] of petit orage [petitoraʒ] was quite different from that of petite orage [petitorãʒ];⁷ it seems that the implosive character of the latter and the explosive character of the former reveal a different syllabation, the basis of which is probably to be found in the different lexical words petit [peti] and petite [petit]. Durand admits however that experiments conducted with other pairs were not conclusive, but Edouard Pichon in his review of her work, underlines the importance of her observations:

Mais la portée des faits observés par Mlle Durand est plus grande encore: ils montrent que, si importante que soit l'unité phonétique appelée RHÈSE, c'est-à-dire celle réunie sous un ACCENT-ROI (EGLF, 166), le mot garde une valeur à l'intérieur

de la rhèse. On s'était trop pressé de dire que le mot n'a pas d'existence; les faits corrigent cette affirmation trop absolue. Quelques ténus qu'ils puissent être, il y a en français des signes démarcatifs (12) entre les morphosomes (13).⁸

When he goes beyond the limitations of pedagogical formulations, Delattre reaches similar conclusions and after asking the question "Le mot est-il une entité phonétique en français?" he answers it as follows:

La tendance du mot à être une entité phonétique en français peut se manifester, entre autres, par les moyens suivants:

1. La désaccentuation incomplète des syllabes finales de mots à l'intérieur du groupe rythmique.
2. L'accentuation de la partie initiale de mots (accent d'insistance).
3. Des altérations dans l'articulation des consonnes de liaison et d'enchaînement, appréciables surtout par le degré et le sens de la tension (croissante ou décroissante), le degré de force, et le degré de voisement.⁹

It is clear therefore that French has the possibility to mark word boundaries even if it does not do so consistently. But in order to establish what the status of the word is in a phonological analysis of French, i.e. in order to establish whether such an analysis must recognize or ignore word boundaries, one need not

restrict oneself to an examination of phonetic demarcative signals. Where the search for phonetic markers fails by itself to yield conclusive results, processes of a more abstract nature may help clarify the overall picture.¹⁰

It is well known for example that in French the sequence nasal vowel + nasal consonant is impossible within morphemes.¹¹ On the other hand, over morpheme and word boundaries, such sequences are quite common, e.g.

emmener /ã+məne/ 'to take out, away'

un marin /œ#marɛ/ 'a sailor'

The sequence nasal vowel + nasal consonant constitutes therefore a positive demarcative signal in French since it reveals the existence of a word (or a morpheme) boundary.¹²

Another phenomenon to be examined is the deletion of mute e. It has been shown by Pierre Léon that, other things being equal, mute e is more likely to be deleted over word boundaries than in word internal position.¹³ Léon asked his informants (approximately 50 French professors at the University of Toronto) to read the following 3 phrases:

un appartement vide 'an empty apartment'

un porte-manteau 'a coat hanger'

une porte manquée 'a missed door'

The results were very conclusive: in word-internal position (un appartement vide), 90% of mute e's were pronounced; over a word boundary (une porte manquée), 96% of mute e's were deleted; in the intermediate case represented by the compound word un porte-manteau, 78% of mute e's were deleted.

The relevance of word boundaries is also suggested by another phenomenon revolving around mute e deletion but going somewhat beyond it: postconsonantal liquid deletion as in quatre chevaux [katšəvo]. The behavior of the sequence cons + liquid + [ə] + cons is slightly different in word internal position and when a word boundary intervenes between [ə] and the following consonant. Thus the word quatre in quatre voitures can be realized either as [katrə] or [kat] with deletion of both mute e and the postconsonantal liquid.¹⁴ On the other hand, when the same sequence (cons. + liquid + [ə] + cons.) occurs in word-medial position, no deletion of either the mute e or the liquid is possible as revealed by the following examples:

comprenez [kčprəne] *[kčpne] '(v) understand'

rompre nos chaînes [rčpnošɛn] 'break our chains'

simplement [sčpləmă] *[sčpmă] 'simply'

simple mensonge [sčpmăsčž] 'simple lie'

nous crevons [nukrəvč] *[nukvč] 'we burst...'

sucré de canne [sčkdəkan] 'cane sugar'

raclement [rakləmə] *[rakmə] 'scraping'

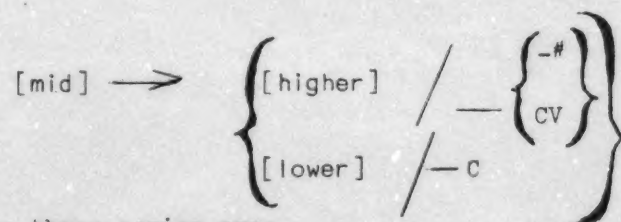
je racle mon plancher [rakčplăšɛ] 'I scrub my floor'

accoutrement [akutrəmă] *[akutmă] 'attire'

quatre manteaux [katmăto] 'four coats'

In this case as in the previous example, it is clear that some phonotactic rules for Modern French have to be formulated in terms of word- as well as syllable-boundaries.

The next example will deal with what has been called by Delattre (1966) the Loi de Position. It states that the mid vowels of French are higher or lower depending on whether they occur in free or checked syllables.



Examples for the three series are:

fée [fe] 'fairy' vs faire [fer] 'iron'

présage [prezaʒ] 'omen' vs perdu [pərdy] 'lost'

peu [pø] 'little' vs peur [poer] 'fear'

peau [po] 'skin' vs port [por] 'harbor'

There are exceptions to this "law", since for the front unrounded series, lower mid vowels can occur in free syllables, e.g. fait [fɛ], and for the other two series higher mid vowels can occur in checked syllables, e.g. gueuse [gøz] and rose [roz].¹⁵

In spite of these restrictions, this law constitutes an important generalization about the Modern French vocalic system as shown by the fact that in some regional varieties of French it applies without exception, and as revealed by some historical developments. Thus the spelling of the word événement [evenmã] with two acute accents reveals a previous pronunciation [evenəmã]. When the mute e disappeared, the second syllable changed from free to checked and the second vowel changed from higher mid to lower mid; the spelling however remained unchanged.

The Law of Position as stated above is reflected in the organization of text-books such as A. Valdman et al., A Drillbook of French Pronunciation, and quite rightly so. It seems necessary however to

point out that if it applies within words, or over morpheme boundaries, it does not apply over word-boundaries¹⁷ as shown by the following examples:

Je cède 'I yield'	céder 'to yield'	j'ai cédé 'I have yielded'
[sɛd]	[sede]	[ʒe sede]

but

Je cède à mon frère 'I yield to my brother'
[ʒəsɛdamœfrɛr]

not *[ʒə-se-da-mœ-frɛr]

Thus this short sentence can either be represented as [ʒə-sɛ-da-mœ-frɛr] in which case the Law of Position does not apply, and this seems to be due to the presence of a word boundary; or as [ʒə-sɛd-a-mœ-frɛr] and postulate a syllabic cut which is contrary to the rules of syllabification as they have generally been formulated for French, but coincides with a word boundary.¹⁸

The same thing is shown by the following example:

<u>le premier</u>	<u>la première</u>	'the first one' (masc. and fem.)
[prəmje]	[prəmjer]	

but

<u>le premier ami</u> ¹⁹	<u>la première amie</u>	'the first friend' (masc. and fem.)
[prəmjerami]	[prəmjerami]	

As in the preceding case, if we admit that the Law of Position is a valid generalization, the same sequence of phonemes is syllabified in two different ways. The example la première amie shows that the Law of position is blocked by a word boundary. The example le premier ami suggests that a liaison consonant goes with the following syllable, whereas a word-final consonant is part of the last syllable of that

word even when the next word begins with a vowel. This is the basis for the distinction between liaison and enchaînement, the former referring to consonants not pronounced in the isolated word, while the latter concerns consonants always pronounced. The behavior of the mid vowel e in the previous example suggests a syllabification which is in keeping with the observations made by Durant and Delattre about the articulatory characteristics of the consonants of liaison and enchaînement.²⁰

One more set of examples will be used to illustrate the role of word boundaries in the functioning of the Law of Position. For this, forms will be taken from the regional variety of French spoken in Gironde where the Law of Position applies without exception. Thus, in this dialect fait and fée have the same pronunciation [fe] and gueuse and rose are realized as [gœz] and [rɔz] respectively.

Forms which violate the Law of Position in the standard variety show more alternation between masculine and feminine in Gironde. Thus, mauvais [e] and mauvaise [ɛ] are distinguished not only through the presence vs the absence of the final consonant but also through the opposition [a]:[ɛ], whereas [ɛ] is found in both the masculine and the feminine in Parisian French. But here again, the Law of Position does not apply over word boundaries as shown by the following syntagm:

une mauvaise épée 'a bad sword'
(mavɛzɛpɛ)

where the mid front unrounded vowel is lower although according to generally accepted syllabification it appears to occur in a free syllable:

Some developments which have led to the fusion of two words into one are particularly revealing. The syntagm de bonne heure 'early' yields a different pronunciation of the o than the syntagm une bonne heure where the elements bonne and heure have retained their individuality:

de bonne heure [də bonœ r] 'early'
une bonne heure [Ûn bonœ r] 'a good time'

as in

Il s'est levé de bonne heure 'He got up early'
C'est une bonne heure pour aller à la pêche 'It's a good
time to go fishing'

Similarly in this regional variety the syntagm bon(ne) ami(e), has taken the meaning "sweetheart" and is pronounced [bonam] as in

Il va voir sa bonne amie 'He's going to see his sweetheart'
or
Elle va voir son bon ami 'She is going to see her sweetheart'

and as opposed to

Il a toujours été un bon ami de la famille
[bonam]
'He has always been a good friend of the family'

There seems to have been in both cases (de bonne heure, bon ami) the fusion of two meanings into one, followed by phonological coalescence and restructuring whereby the multi-word origin is forgotten.²¹

Canadian French also exhibits some vocalic alternations which are conditioned by syllabic structure. The high vowels /i/, /ø/, /u/ are tense ([i], [ø], [u]) in free syllables, and lax ([ɪ], [ʊ], [ʊ]) in checked syllables. The laxing rule could be formulated as follows:

$$\begin{array}{c}
 \text{V} \\
 [+high] \rightarrow \left\{ \begin{array}{l} [+tense] / \text{---} \left\{ \begin{array}{c} \# \\ CV \end{array} \right\} \\ [-tense] / \text{---} C \end{array} \right.
 \end{array}$$

This rule accounts for the following alternations:

<u>petit</u> [pet ^s i] 'small' (masc.)	~	<u>petite</u> [pet ^s it] 'small' (fem.)
<u>lu</u> [lɔ] 'read' (past part.)	~	<u>lutte</u> [lɔt] 'fight'
<u>tout</u> [tu] 'all' (masc.)	~	<u>toute</u> [tut] 'all' (fem.)

It does not apply, however, over word boundaries. Thus, the syntagms tout ému and toute émue are distinguished by the opposition [u] : [ʊ]:

[tu'émʊ] [tutemʊ] 'quite moved' (masc. and fem.)

In the latter example, a syllable boundary must be postulated after the second [t], i.e., in contradiction with the general rules of syllabification, but coinciding with a word boundary.

The role of the word boundary is also obvious in the following examples

petite amie [pet^sitami] 'little friend' (fem.)

requiring the following syllabification

[pet^st^hit=ami]
(#)

and lutte acharnée [lɔt=aʃaʁ=ne] 'furious fight'
(#)

If one agrees with Vaidman that "the word is the linguistic unit most available to the native speaker,"²² it is hardly surprising that

this unit will retain its phonological identity in the group. While this was, to a certain extent, supported by articulatory characteristics of juncture, it was felt to be only a marginal feature of French, a potentiality for emphasis and other phonostylistic effects, and the often-quoted following two lines

Gal, amant de la reine, alla, tour magnanime,

Galamment de l'arène à la Tour Magne à Nîmes

could be viewed as representative of French phonology, as an example of ambiguity resulting from the total elimination of word-boundaries in the group.²³ The data examined in this paper - sequences nasal vowel + nasal consonant, mute e- deletion, post-consonantal deletion, and more particularly the Law of Position and the laxing rule of Canadian French - suggest, however, that the role played by word-boundaries in French phonology is far from being marginal and that, at any rate, it is more important than has been generally acknowledged.

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Notes

¹This is a revised version of a paper presented at the 3rd Annual Meeting of the Western Conference in Linguistics, held in Victoria, B.C., October 19-20, 1973.

²Principes de phonétique française à l'usage des étudiants anglo-américains, 2nd ed. (Middlebury College: The College Store, 1951), p. 20.

³Albert Valdman, in "Not All is Wrong with French Spelling," The French Review, 37 (1963), p. 217, uses this formula "to paraphrase Delattre."

⁴Teaching French: An Introduction to Applied Linguistics (Waltham, Toronto, London: Blaisdell, 1965), p. 80.

⁵"Prosodic Systems: French," Lingua, 13 (1965), p. 131.

⁶French Prosodics and Phonotactics: An Historical Typology, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für Romanische Philologie, No. 124 (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1970), p. 29.

⁷Le Genre grammatical en français parlé à Paris et dans la région parisienne (Paris: Bibliothèque du Français moderne, 1936), p. 240. See also Bertil Malmberg, "La coupe syllabique dans le système phonologique du français," Acta Linguistica, 4 (1944), pp. 61-66.

⁸"Genre et questions connexes (Sur les pas de Mlle Durand," Le Français Moderne, 6 (1938), p. 124.

⁹"Le Mot est-il une entité phonétique en français?," Le Français Moderne, 8 (1940), p. 56. See also, by the same author, "L'accent final en français: accent d'intensité, accent de hauteur, accent de durée," The French Review, 12 (1938), pp. 141-45; and "Accent de mot et accent de groupe," The French Review, 13 (1939), pp. 141-46.

¹⁰Sanford Schane's interpretation of the phenomena of liaison and elision, in French Phonology and Morphology (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1968), pp. 1-17, comes to mind here since the application of his "truncation rule" is restricted to the environment "over word boundaries." The phenomena examined in this paper, however, are of a less abstract nature and can be described in terms of phonotactic constraints; for this reason, the conclusions reached here can be more easily related to and compared with those of previous scholars who hugged the phonetic ground quite closely, e.g., Delattre, Durand, Malmberg, Pichon.

¹¹See for example Albert Valdman, R. J. Salazar, and M. A. Charbonneaux, A Drillbook of French Pronunciation, 2nd ed. (New York, Evanston, and London: Harper and Row, 1970), p. 144. The only exception to this statement is the word ennui [ãnyi] 'boredom'.

¹²See James Anderson, "The Demarcative Function," Lingua, 13 (1965), p. 185. In some cases of a n of liaison, however, there is

vacillation between the sequences oral vowel (denasalized) + n and nasal vowel + n, e.g., mon ami [monami] or [mɔ̃nami]; see Bertil Malmberg, Phonétique française (Malmö: Hermods, 1969), pp. 69 and 144. For further examples exhibiting denasalization, see Delattre, Principes de phonétique française, p. 28.

¹³"Apparition, maintien et chute du 'E caduc'," La Linguistique, 2 (1966), pp. 111-22. Reprinted in Léon, Essais de phonostylistique (Montréal, Paris, Bruxelles: Didier, 1971), pp. 67-79.

¹⁴This behavior of the sequence cons + liquid + [ə] is closely paralleled by that of the same sequence in group-final position. Thus in the sentence J'en ai quatre, the word quatre can be realized as [katrə], [katʁ], with deletion of the mute e and devoicing of the liquid, or [kat]. Not all grammarians agree on the "correctness" of this latter pronunciation but most linguists acknowledge its ever increasing occurrence. The case in which the liquid is retained but devoiced can then be viewed as a transitional phenomenon and the behavior exhibited in group-medial, word final position, as on its way to becoming the norm.

¹⁵In Standard French, this law can be stated in a more restricted way to take into account the exceptions mentioned above:

[e] never occurs in checked syllables

[œ] and [ɔ] never occur in free syllables.

In unstressed position, however [ɔ] can occur in free syllables, e.g. politique [politik], but depending on the dialect, this o can be

realized as [o], [ɔ] or an intermediate vowel; in stressed position the law is without exceptions and allows no variation. For an evaluation of the Loi de Position, see Valdman, "The Loi de Position as a Pedagogical Norm," in Papers in Linguistics and Phonetics to the Memory of Pierre Delattre, ed. A. Valdman (The Hague, Paris: Mouton, 1972), pp. 473-85.

¹⁶ See Malmberg, Phonétique française, p. 41, fn. 2.

¹⁷ Although not very revealing because it deals with an area open to learned pressures rather than systemic developments, due to its archaic character, the following statement by Valdman in "Teaching the French Vowels," MLJ, 45 (1961), p. 259, seems to indicate that its author views the Law of Position as applying over word-boundaries: "/e/ does not occur in checked syllable (except for rare instances like aurai-je which are fairly literary and which most speakers pronounce [oreʒ]) so that /e/ and /ɛ/ contrast only in free syllable."

¹⁸ For the principles of syllabation followed here, see Ernst Pulgram, "Prosodic Systems: French," Lingua, 13 (1965), pp. 131-32. Departures from these principles are rare, particularly those which take into account word boundaries, but isolated examples can be found in the literature. Thus Aurélien Sauvageot, in "Les divers français parlés," Le Français dans le Monde 69 (1969), p. 19, justifies his syllabic division of the syntagm le retour as follows: "Il ne saurait être question de se représenter la coupure syllabique à un autre emplacement (læ(r)tur), car il s'agirait alors d'une autre séquence

l3r(tur), orthographiée leur tour."

¹⁹Although the pronunciation [prəmjerami] is heard, and given as the norm by Pierre Fouché in Traité de Prononciation française, 2nd ed. (Paris: Klincksieck, 1959), p. 435, and Léon Warnant, in Dictionnaire de la Prononciation française, 2nd revised ed. (Gembloux: Duculot, 1964), p. XIV, Durand, in Le Genre grammatical, p. 241, describes it as extremely rare among her informants.

²⁰See respectively Le Genre grammatical, p. 240, and Principes de phonétique française, p. 26.

²¹That bon ami and de bonne heure are to be viewed as single words is revealed by the fact that no other linguistic element can be inserted between bon and ami or de bonne and heure without changing the meaning of these two syntagms; for a set of procedures to identify words, see R. Swaminathan, "The Word," IRAL, 11, No. 1 (1973), pp. 29-49.

²²"Not All is Wrong with French Spelling," p. 222.

²³A reading of these two lines resulting in total ambiguity would, however, be extremely artificial, in that it would be devoid of pauses and would necessitate a uniform, neutral intonation throughout. For the role of intonation in the identification of words in the spoken chain, see Georges Faure, "L'Intonation et l'identification des mots dans la chaîne parlée (exemples empruntés à la langue française)," Proceedings of the Fourth International Congress of Phonetic Sciences,

ed. Antti Sovijärvi and Pentti Aalto (The Hague: Mouton, 1962),
pp. 598-609.